

Step By Step Acre By Acre

By Russel Grunden

Working with Hoosier land trusts and conservation-minded landowners, the Indiana Heritage Trust has protected more than 2,600 acres of the Big Walnut Creek corridor between North Salem and Greencastle. Looking much like a question mark laying on its side, a white gravel road leads to a parking area at McCloud Nature Preserve. This is the northern tip of the Big Walnut Creek corridor. Other protected sites are downstream.

Whether for wildlife habitat, recreation or because of its special nature, the Indiana Heritage Trust finds properties in Indiana that are exceptional and should be protected. The land might be important or fragile. It could provide valuable habitat for an endangered species or offer opportunities for recreation. The properties also could provide a chance to preserve or enhance special cultural resources.

The money for these land purchases comes from me and from you. Those of us who buy the Environmental License Plate are partners in this effort. Other partners include land trusts and often the landowners who forgo large profits in order to protect the property. Looking back, 2003 was a successful year for the protection of special properties in Indiana. The sale of 68,996 Environmental License Plates provided \$1,724,900 with which we were able to purchase or protect nearly 1,100 acres of land. Through the end of November in 2004 Hoosiers had purchased 65,370 plates for revenue of \$1,634,250.

The partnerships we formed to purchase some of the properties allowed us to leverage the ELP money to go even further. In fact, our goal of 100,000 acres by our bi-centennial in 2016 would be completely unattainable without our partners.

Heritage Trust partnerships work in many different ways. Sometimes we simply pool our financial resources to buy acreage that just one of us would be unable to afford. Sometimes one partner will purchase a property but another will take over the maintenance and management of the property and thereby share the overall cost.

However the partnerships are structured, we all benefit. Each dollar we Hoosiers spend on an ELP leverages another \$4 from our partners. The environment and our natural resources and cultural resources are the winners.

Although the land-purchase goals the DNR set are admittedly ambitious, we are still anticipating success. Reaching the original goal of 100,000 acres purchased by the 2016 bi-centennial will be strenuous. But the partnerships make it possible.

Big Walnut Nature Preserve

In the lyrics for one of his songs in *Sunday in the Park with George*, Stephen Sondheim wrote “Bit by bit, Putting it together, Piece by piece, Working out the vision night and day, All it takes is time and perseverance, With a little luck along the way...”

And so it has been with Big Walnut Nature Preserve. Each year or two we have been able to add another piece to the puzzle that is this magnificent property. In 2002 we added, in

partnership with The Nature Conservancy, nearly 375 new acres to this area. The next year we added another 193 acres.

Last year we added, alone and with partners, four new tracts to Big Walnut Nature Preserve.

The first tract, a 26-acre addition, provides important access and buffer to the existing preserve. A fairly large drainageway cuts through the property and into adjacent forestland, allowing reforestation and stabilization of this drainage. This will minimize agricultural runoff into the preserve and into Big Walnut Creek.

The tract also has frontage on the county road, which will provide excellent access. Currently there is no access from the west.

The second piece consists of a 46-acre addition of 11 acres of forested ravine and 35 acres of agricultural land that could have been developed into home sites. As such, it is a combination of significant features and critical buffer.

The third tract was obtained through a partnership with Central Indiana Land Trust. The project is 38.8 acres that includes high quality forest on a high bluff and ravines over Big Walnut Creek. This project protects a hemlock refugia—an assemblage of plants and animals very different from the surrounding central Indiana landscape.

At the core of the Hemlock Refugia Tract is a very nice stand of eastern hemlock trees, including some large specimens. These are plants and animals common to much more northern climate.

The site includes a five-acre field, which will be planted to forest. The property has minimal parking and a small trail system.

The final tract added to Big Walnut Nature Preserve is called the Munshower Tract and is made possible by a partnership with The Nature Conservancy. This 20-acre tract is entirely wooded and features upland dry-mesic and mesic forest and contains parts of three tributary valleys leading to the creek. The forest contains very high quality, marketable timber. This tract is in the core of the Big Walnut preserve design.

Boot Lake Nature Preserve

An acquisition, in partnership with the City of Elkhart Public Works & Utilities, adds 66.6 acres to the 160-acre Boot Lake Nature Preserve in Elkhart County. The addition includes the preservation of a diversity of habitats: wetlands, woodland and cropland (each approximately 22 acres). The cropland will be restored into prairie.

Boot Lake is an unusual wetland type called a sandy-muck flat and is a part of a 100-acre wetland complex. Two state endangered plants—pipewort and Smith's bulrush—and two state threatened species—dwarf umbrella-sedge and long beaked bald-rush—have been identified in the wetlands of the Boot Lake area.

This project will assure protection and preservation of a significant natural resource, as well as animal and plant species sharing the same watershed, wetland and associated uplands.

Residents of the area currently use the Boot Lake Nature Preserve for passive recreation such as hiking, bird watching, and picnicking. Tours also have been conducted for school children.

Thompson Bog Nature Preserve

This 40-acre project is located in LaPorte County. It protects one of the few remaining high quality bogs in Indiana. It has been a target for protection since the 1970s, when it was discovered during the Coastal Zone Natural Area Inventory.

It is considered a “tall shrub bog,” containing tamarack, leather leaf and several rare species. The project consists of a 35-acre bog complex and a conservation easement on the adjacent 15-acre agricultural field.

Calvert and Porter Woods Nature Preserve

An addition of 75.2 acres to the Calvert and Porter Woods Nature Preserve in Montgomery County, it contains high quality forest of similar diversity to the existing 40-acre old growth woods. These woods (formerly known as Beckville Woods) are a National Natural Landmark and contain a heron rookery.

The addition nearly triples the size of Calvert and Porter Woods.

Jackson-Washington State Forest

This new holding is a 20-acre addition to Jackson-Washington State Forest, located in Washington County. It is completely wooded except for a powerline right-of-way that has shrubby grass cover on an estimated six acres. The remaining 14 acres are mixed oak/hickory upland forest. The parcel is adjacent to the forest on one side and is very close to the Knobstone Trail corridor.

Spring Mill State Park

This 39.4-acre addition to Spring Mill State Park along the west border located in Lawrence County contains approximately 10 acres of upland forest and 29.4 acres of pasture land. It borders the Donaldson Woods Nature Preserve and Twin Caves on the east. The western portion of the land is within the watershed of Twin Caves complex and the wooded area is next to Donaldson Woods, a property on the National Natural Landmark register.

These are the new additions to the Indiana Heritage Trust properties. They are delightfully varied and vitally important. But the purchase and protection of these are not all that we have been doing. While one hand is out there negotiating for new acquisitions, the other hand is improving properties we purchased years ago. Let's look at a couple.

The Limberlost Area

In June 1993, Limberlost Swamp Remembered (LSR) went public with their plans to restore part of the Historic Limberlost Swamp in Adams and Jay counties in east central Indiana. The LSR project was formed as a direct result of a year of meetings with Friends of the Limberlost, ACRES Land Trust, Limberlost State Historic Site, Indiana State Museum and Jay County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Several landowners were contacted, and they agreed to sell their flood-prone land. First, they signed their land into the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Wetland Reserve Program. Meanwhile, donations from ACRES Land Trust, Ropchan Foundation, M.E. Raker Foundation, and the many individual Foot-of-Swamp donations raised the required match to purchase the land.

In 1996, Indiana Heritage Trust funds purchased 143 acres of the drained Loblolly Marsh and 240 acres in 1997. Today, the DNR owns and manages 1,125 acres of Limberlost wetlands with approximately 50 percent restored. Most of this land was purchased with the IHT funds.

Restoration of the land began in 1997 with a small area of native prairie grass at the Loblolly Marsh Wetland Preserve. Drainage tiles were removed from the land in 1998 and wetland vegetation began to emerge. Visitors to the property immediately began to see an increase in bird species and abundance.

Today, visitors to the Loblolly Marsh may see a bald eagle snatch a fish from a wetland; great blue herons and great egrets catch fish, tadpoles, and frogs from the wetlands; shorebirds probe the mudflats; American bitterns and least bitterns find cover in the reeds.

Double-crested cormorants and grebes dive for food; mallards, blue-winged teal, and wood ducks nest nearby and raise their young in the wetlands. Sandhill cranes stopover during their spring and fall migrations.

The improved habitat attracts the birds; the birds attract bird watchers.

Hoosier writer Gene Stratton-Porter drew inspiration from the Loblolly Marsh and surrounding area. Today, thanks to the funds raised from the sale of Environmental License Plates and the on-going efforts of the DNR and its partners, school children and other visitors to the Limberlost historic site and Loblolly Marsh can feel the wonder experienced by Gene Stratton-Porter.

Plans call for a five-mile corridor of wetlands from Geneva to the Loblolly Marsh, and a three-mile wetland corridor to the Rainbow Bottom wetlands. The 440-acre Loblolly Marsh is in its sixth year of restoration. By 2010, visitors should see at least 1,500 acres restored with all of the projects we have in the works.

Pokagon State Park

Rarely does a long-established state park, seemingly land-locked by water, subdivisions and a major highway have a chance to add acreage. Pokagon State Park in extreme northeast Indiana, however, did have a chance and did make it happen. Not just once, but twice, in two consecutive years! It took a special partnering with the ACRES Land Trust in northeast Indiana to make it happen... and help from IHT.

The first 29-acre parcel was literally at the entrance of the park. At the road frontage was a 12-room motel, built in the mid-1950s. Plans to develop the property in 2000 would have included a strip mall, hotel with conference facilities, indoor/outdoor water recreation park, and housing of various sized units.

The development never materialized and in 2002, the property came up for sale. Park officials and the ACRES Land Trust acted quickly. ACRES provided the first \$55,000 to secure the deal and fundraising began, with IHT providing a significant \$100,000 to the total of \$625,000.

The land is not only an important buffer at the doorstep of Pokagon, but a significant natural area in its own right. Rolling wooded hills, a steep ravine, and some large stone erosion control dams built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s offer a great setting for a new trail.

The old motel was razed in 2003 and the road frontage is returning to its natural state. This year Pokagon added a parcel immediately to the north of the “old motel” site. Once again the ACRES Land Trust took the point position on the project and once again IHT provided another \$100,000 to the purchase price of \$650,000. This acquisition ensures that no further development that could be detrimental will occur near the park entrance.

Whether you’re looking at older, well-established properties or new ones that have more plans than actual development, the DNR and its land acquisition partners offer Hoosiers a grand buffet of choices. And we’re just getting started. We’re well on the way to meeting the goal of 100,000 acres by 2016. But even more importantly, we are on the way to providing Hoosiers a rich experience with our natural and cultural resources.

Indiana Heritage Trust projects

372 Acres protected in 2004

Project 192 B

Big Walnut Nature Preserve addition (Munshower Tract) (in partnership with The Nature Conservancy)

20 acres located in Putnam County, which is entirely wooded. Features upland dry-mesic and mesic forest and contains parts of three tributary valleys leading to the creek. The forest contains very-high quality, marketable timber. This tract is in the core of the Big Walnut preserve design.

Project 209

Boot Lake Nature Preserve addition (in partnership with City of Elkhart Public Works & Utilities)

66.6-acre addition to the 160-acre Boot Lake Nature Preserve in Elkhart County and includes a diversity of habitats: wetlands, woodland and cropland (each approximately 22 acres). Boot Lake is unusual sandy-muck flat type of wetland and is a part of a 100 acre wetland complex.

Project 252

Thompson Bog Nature Preserve

40 acres located in LaPorte County of one of the few remaining high quality bogs in Indiana. Considered a “tall shrub bog”, it contains tamarack, leather leaf and several rare species. The project includes a 35-acre bog complex and a conservation easement on the adjacent 15-acre agricultural field.

Project 257

Big Walnut Nature Preserve addition

26-acre addition to the Big Walnut Nature Preserve located in Putnam County will provide important access and serve as a buffer to the preserve. A large drainageway cuts through the property and into adjacent forestland. Allowing reforestation and stabilization of this drainage will minimize agricultural runoff into the preserve and into Big Walnut Creek. The tract has frontage on the county road that will provide excellent access.

Project 258

Big Walnut Nature Preserve addition

46-acre addition to the Big Walnut Nature Preserve consisting of 11 acres of forested ravine and 35 acres of agricultural land that is highly developable (1,000 feet of road frontage and 4 home sites). It is a combination of significant features and critical buffer to the immediate north of Project 192 (above).

Project 276

Big Walnut Hemlock Refugia Tract (in partnership with Central Indiana Land Trust)

38.8 acres of high quality forest on a high bluff and ravines over Big Walnut Creek. The tract includes flora and fauna very different from the surrounding central Indiana landscape, making it a hemlock refugia; including a stand of eastern hemlock trees. The property has a small parking lot and small trail system.

Project 278

Calvert and Porter Woods Nature Preserve addition

75.2-acre addition trebles the size of Calvert and Porter Woods Nature Preserve in Montgomery County. Includes high quality forest of diversity similar to the existing 40-acre old growth woods. Formerly known as Beckville Woods, the property is a National Natural Landmark and contains a heron rookery.

Project 280

Jackson-Washington State Forest addition

20-acre addition to Jackson-Washington State Forest in Washington County. Completely wooded except for an estimated six-acre power line right-of-way with shrubby grass cover. The other 14 acres are mixed oak/hickory upland forest. The tract is close to the Knobstone Trail corridor.

Project 291

Spring Mill State Park addition

39.4-acre addition to Spring Mill State Park along the west border located in Lawrence County containing about 10 acres of upland forest and 29.4 acres of pasture land. It borders the Donaldson Woods Nature Preserve and Twin Caves on the east. The western portion of the land is within the watershed of Twin Caves complex and the wooded area is next to Donaldson Woods, a National Natural Landmark register property.